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ABSTRACT

Using a case history approach, one teacher's attempt to integrate theory and practice in an elementary English-as-a-Second-Language classroom is described. Paulo Freire's problem-posing educational model is examined in terms of its capacity to incorporate effectively the following theoretical premises: (1) language and culture form an inseparable unit; (2) language learning may not equal language acquisition; and (3) language acquisition necessitates language-focused comprehensible input in a suitable affective environment. A narrative of in-class experiences traces the development of teacher and learner in a collaborative decision-making process, juxtaposing features of behavioral and problem-posing curricular approaches, including those that are communicative, functional-notional, grammar-based, and content-based. It is proposed that positive learner outcomes can include self-worth, critical thinking, full literacy, language acquisition, and learner autonomy, and positive teacher outcomes can include fuller understanding of students and the collaborative nature of learning. (Author/MSE)

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Toward collaboration as a viaduct for student/teacher interaction

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Using a case history approach, this paper describes one teacher's attempt to integrate theory and practice in an elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Paulo Freire's problem-posing educational model (cited in Crawford-Lange, 1981) is viewed in its capacity to effectively incorporate the following theoretical premises: Language and culture form an inseparable unit; language learning may not equal language acquisition; language acquisition necessitates message-focused "comprehensible input" in a suitable affective environment (Krashen, 1984). A narrative of in-class experiences traces the development of teacher and learner in a collaborative decision-making process which juxtaposes features of behavioral and problem-posing curricular approaches, including those that are communicative, functional-notional, grammar-based, and content-based. Positive learner outcomes can include self-worth, critical thinking, full literacy, language acquisition, and learner autonomy, and potential positive teacher outcomes include fuller understanding of students and the collaborative nature of learning.

Despite a growing consciousness of the benefits to be reaped from an interactive learning environment, many of us have still to meet the challenge of integration into our own classroom situations. Apparently "fixed in an operational 'rut,' [we are unsure] just how to bridge that chasm, as it so often seems, between theory and practice" (Prendergast, 1987).

During a recent sabbatical leave of absence, I found myself particularly engaged by the idea of a problem-posing approach to education. I was deeply impressed by the humanism and potential of its dialogical, horizontal, and participatory orientation, as described in Crawford-Lange (1981). A problem-posing approach provides an insightful differentiation between the "act of knowing" and knowledge. The "act of knowing" is seen as the acquisition of information, skills, and knowledge with education being the "product" of creative proplem-solving on the part of learners and teachers, while knowledge is generally seen as a "pre-existing body of facts for consumption" (Crawford-Lange, 1981). By extension, cornerstones of this idea

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must be the development of responsible learner initiative and critical thinking, the practical application of which is thus delineated by Wallerstein (1983): "The problem-posing process directs students to name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and finally, suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem."

Defined thus, I found excitingly evident its inherent capability for practically translating my own theoretical persuasion that language and culture are inseparable in any real communicative event (where culture is seen as the expression of that peculiar and shared gestalt of a people, deriving from the dynamics of interacting beliefs, values, and behaviors). The explicit focus on real, meaningful, learner-relevant dialogue and material was also readily congruent with a theory of second language acquisition with which I had already experimented very successfully, via application of Terrell's *Natural Approach* and Asher's *Total Physical Response* in French and Spanish classrooms. The basic instructional emphases are summarized by Terrell (1982) as 1) providing comprehensible input; 2) lowering anxieties; and 3) creating opportunities to convey messages.

In discussing second language acquisition, Krashen (1984) has proposed that "acquisition is a far more powerful and central process than . . . conscious learning [which] serves only as an editor or monitor, making changes in the form of output under certain, very limited conditions." Acquisition itself results from *comprehensible input* (i.e., language which is significant for the learner as input, but just beyond the learner's reach as output) and attention to the message being conveyed versus its language conveyor. Hence language may be acquired most efficiently when the acquirer 'forgets' that he is listening to or reading another language entailing, of course, the concomitant existence of an affective environment capable of nurturing such an anxiety-free response on the part of the learner (Krashen, 1984). In other words, full access to another language would seem to be most effectively accomplished within its authentic role as a *tool* for communication and expression rather than as a *subject* for study; the latter may indeed produce knowledge, but does not automatically produce functional ability in the medium.

A stimulating year of study and reflection at an end, return to the classroom was to be more abrupt and bewildering than expected, and unaccountably, the old "chasm" still yawned! How to, where to, how much to, when to begin that "bridge?" With endless other demands, the task seemed nothing short of overwhelming. Pacifying myself rather unsatisfactorily with existing materials in my foreign language classrooms, I finally determined to fully commit to the challenge of creating new materials in at least one of my ESL classrooms. Indeed, as a student teacher fulfilling certification requirements in ESL, I was very fortunate to be afforded the

opportunity, besides unstinting encouragement and support from both advisor and supervising teacher.

I began in early January, with assignments at the junior high and elementary school levels. Years of second language teaching notwithstanding, I found myself very apprehensive, particularly with regard to the elementary assignments. This would be a novel experience, not only in its unaccustomed curricular approach and instructional strategies, but also in terms of its group dynamics. I had never taught or even considered teaching below the seventh grade age range, and had never taught, except at the junior college level, to class groups of less than 15-20 (more commonly, 30-35) students.

My account will focus on a class of one; a 10-year-old, fifth grade girl from Central America, for considerations of privacy, to be referred to simply as "M."

The situation could not have been any more different from what I expected! Desperately grateful for a 2-week observation period to master clamant impulses to retreat to "safer" ground, I uneasily reported for duty minus the comfortable, well-used crutches of carefully-structured lesson outlines complete with preplanned exercises and activities, sufficing instead with a review of my own professional goals: to guide and help students (a) to value themselves and their potential contributions; (b) to develop their own capacities for critical thinking; (c) to accomplish full literacy; (d) to acquire an additional (not replacement) language-cum-culture so as to permit access to, as well as fruitful functioning and interaction within, the larger community and its various sub-groups (school, neighborhood, church, etc.); and (e) to command the requisite "access routes" to enable and accelerate learner autonomy. Calmed considerably in this redirection of focus away from myself, I bent to the task of intent, non-prejudicial "listening." What were M's goals, aspirations, interests, frustrations . . .?

However, two industrious weeks of observation only served to augment the quandary. I had, in fact, been witness to the undeniable and proud successes of an avid, highly intelligent pupil. She was happily functioning in a sensitively caring and anxiety-free environment within an exemplary systems-behavioral design. Fortuitously, in retrospect, there seemed no alternative but to begin work within this framework. It permitted me the interchange necessary to more accurately determine M's linguistic ability, preferred learning strategies, and degree of flexibility in exploring alternatives, while allowing much needed time for adaptation to a new teacher and development of a comfortable relationship between us.*

The next couple of weeks evidenced more time spent in progressively less-structured oral dialogue, with M's own interests and preoccupations increasingly pivotal in generating comprehensible input and output activities,

* See article in this issue by William Sims

which was rather effortlessly to lead to more shared decision-making as regards lesson content and form, and simultaneously less predetermination by linguistically-sequenced objectives. We gradually shifted classwork from the correspondingly organized texts--initially to independent homework assignments supported by in-class correction, and then eventually to discretionary, independent work, which would intrude on classtime only as requested by M (rather infrequently) for clarification of comments or corrections on returned worksheets.

Paralleling this process, we also tried the gradual implementation of a functional-notional approach, which was very useful in contextualizing M's superb linguistic ability. Conveying a sense of purpose-appropriate language versus a merely syntactically-driven lexicon, it would concomitantly reveal the inextricable weave of culture in such negotiation. In her chapter on "Curricular Alternatives for Second Language Learning," Crawford-Lange (1987) quotes the following questions proffered by Munby toward determination of functions and notions (content) for the learner: "Who is communicating with whom, why, where, when, how, at what level, about what, and in what way?" Clearly, answers to these questions must also embrace the cultural parameter.

An interesting dividend in our particular situation as we worked through such communicative intents as greetings and introductions, asking and answering information questions, making requests and excuses, *et cetera*, was the sometimes bicultural (yet monolingual) input available due to the American and English/West Indian backgrounds of supervising and student teachers, respectively. Of course, M's own cultural heritage and expertise were also recognized and valued, and again fortuitously, we were able to exploit my own experiences in acquisition of "Spanish as a Second Language," experiences of daily life within a related cultural context (South America), and experiences in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in the neighboring junior high school. Such oral dialogues would naturally find written expression and further exploration in M's weekly journal, as she compared, contrasted, and expressed her own opinions with regard to holidays, schools, home-life, and so forth.

At this point, she also looked back to her first month at School "X," recapturing some of the feelings and impressions for us. Before describing our first completely learner-engendered venture together and indeed what proved to be the beginning of a true "partnership" as co-learners and explorers, I should like to reproduce an unedited portion of this composition, illustrative of M's competence and written performance.

> *The first day of school was hard, strange, happy, pretty, boring and unhappy.*

> *It was hard because I couldn't understand any word what they were saying, strange because I never had been with a teacher (boy) never, happy because I was in another school of other country, pretty because always I loved when the first day started, boring because I couldn't do anything of the work, and I try to see what was doing my next to me, but I didn't understand anything, unhappy because I fell incomplete like somebody was mising en my school and house. . . .Now I fell that I can talk a lot more and understand better than before. I'm so happy.* (Anonymous, personal communication, February, 1988)

It should probably also be mentioned that much of M's reading by this time (apart from a couple of exploratory library sessions together) was essentially unfettered and pursued independently for her own pleasure. An enthusiastic reader, she was reading copiously and across a wide range of subjects (biographies, detective mysteries, "Choose Your Own Adventure" stories, etc.), some of which she would voluntarily report on or discuss.

THE BEGINNING OF OUR COLLABORATION

Our collaborative venture was launched quite unexpectedly when pursuant to some activities centered around giving and asking directions, we extended our map work to a cursory review of the world map, locating major bodies of land and water. M was very disturbed by the continental divisions of North and South America, feeling quite sure that Central America had also been named as a continent by her teacher. I was somewhat slow to grasp how important this was to her, but she persistently returned to the topic, proffering one argument after another in refutation of my rather perfunctory and inadequate responses. Reluctantly and quite uncomprehendingly, I was forced to acknowledge M's distress, which seemed to encompass feelings of affront, alienation, and injustice. Chagrined at my own limitations and obtuseness, I promised to further investigate the issue with our science department at the junior high school, and directed myself more assiduously to my commitment as co-learner/explorer and listener.

Admitting that I might be on uncertain ground, I raised the question of whether the seven accepted continental divisions might not in fact be somewhat archaic, and asked whether she had ever heard of the theory of plate tectonics. Unsurprisingly, she had not. I attempted an explanation, at first rather tentatively, feeling a bit ridiculous, but rapidly warming to a subject I had always found very exciting. The end of our session together found me completely amazed. The turmoil had subsided for us both, supplanted by mutual excitement at the prospect of further delving into this fascinating area.

I immediately repaired to the school libraries (elementary and junior high), gathering as many books as I could find on the topic, irrespective of

reading level. However, the most exciting source proved to be the junior high school science department, which, thanks to an accommodating earth science teacher, yielded not only excellent printed materials, but also a videocassette of the telecourse entitled "Planet Earth" (Metropolitan Pittsburgh Public Broadcasting & the National Academy of Sciences, 1986). Unbeknownst to us, we were about to embark on a 6-week project.

Reviewing our materials, we roughly separated the books and magazines into those which M and I would read outside of class and those which we would explore together in class. We began right away with pertinent articles in the January, 1973 issue of *National Geographic* (Camby, 1973; Matthews, 1973), utilizing the excellent pictures and illustrations to seed development of adequate schemata and an essential lexicon prior to viewing of the videotape. Reading also developed naturally in this way, as we supplemented pictures, captions, and the oral dialogue generated with relevant portions of text, sometimes silently, sometimes with one or other of us reading aloud. And as time progressed, this would extend to tangential excursions through a variety of other sources (see Appendix for some of the most frequently consulted).

The foregoing process thus preceded, occasionally interrupted, and succeeded our videotape viewing, which itself spanned a period of 2 to 3 weeks. We were to make full use of the advantages of a cassette recording during this time: frequently pausing for discussion, backing up and reviewing, or discontinuing to consult other sources, be it for supplementation, clarification, or simply to roam down a contingent pathway. We were fortunate, too, to have access to a large topographical globe, indeed one of our favorite and most fruitful resources.

Concurrent with our own undertaking, M had been hard at work on a research project in her regular classroom. On the day of her formal oral presentation in class, she reported breathlessly and was a bundle of nerves. On the one hand she was elated that the presentation had gone well, that she had been able to incorporate some of what she had learned about volcanoes in our investigations, and that her classroom teacher had been really very pleased; on the other hand, she was anxious that she was still speaking too quickly and afraid that her classmates might not always have been able to understand her. She determined then to include a more controlled rate of speech as one of the primary objectives for her oral report at the conclusion of our own project. The latter had been conceived in the very early stages of our inquiry, when our supervising teacher (Mrs. "X")--and a very special person for M--had warmly responded to our proposal; confiding to M how little she herself knew about the subject of plate tectonics, and in fact how interested she would be to learn more about it. Indeed, this anticipated outcome considerably informed our undertaking, as it became an added incentive for M not only to comprehend for her own infor-

mation, but to also be able to communicate this new understanding to someone else.

THE FINAL REPORT

Concluding our joint excursion with some reluctance, M excitedly reviewed and prepared for her oral summation. It was a formidable task, as M was eager to convey it all: Earth's origins, evidence for plates and plate tectonics, boundary types and their relationship to earthquake belts, volcanic activity, and mountain formation, as well as anomalies of hot spots and mid-plate quakes. Armed with charts and globe, she nevertheless did a commendable job of both presenting and discussing in response to questions asked.

At this juncture, M would also decide to complete the project for herself with a formal written report. This resulted from her own initiative and despite our protest and clarification, due to her then heavy workload, that this need not be an outcome; but proud of her accomplishment, she apparently wanted to document it accordingly. This would likewise be entirely her own enterprise, completed out of class and submitted to Mrs. X less than a week later.

The report was limited to three aspects, divided into chapters correspondingly: "Plates Together," "The Hot Spot," and "Subduction." Unedited excerpts follow:

> *200 million years ago all the continents were join together. It was like a supercontinent. That supercontinent was called Pangea. It means all "land together."* . . . .
>
> *The hot spot is the middle of the world. . . . A very interesting thing, but, we're floating in the hot spot. We float because the hot spot is that hot that came liquid.* . . .
>
> *Subduction is when two plates go under. Like when two plates crush to each other and one goes under* (Anonymous, personal comunication, April, 1988).

Subsequent discussion and review of M's oral (taped) and written reports would again culminate in little anticipated expeditions in our learning partnership. Feeling much better at a marked reduction in her rate of speech, we were nevertheless to specify three objectives for continued improvement: rate reduction, distinct word boundaries, and final consonant emphasis. These would be charted daily according to her own awareness and effort, and in response to her own weekly goals (e.g., word boundaries and consonant emphasis: 25% awareness). Similarly, review of her written

report would produce a written language objective for increased accuracy in past tense use entailing the *ed* inflection.

Thus we were to embark upon a course of lessons and activities, the very hub of which would now be language "the tool." With very little time remaining prior to M's return home and the end of the school year, she was anxious to exploit it to the fullest extent possible. Besides galloping through texts and workbooks, she continued to amaze me with her ready and fired responses to my often unsuspectingly casual enquiries. For example, after a routine journal review and discussion of (a) content, (b) organization, (c) past tense usage, I asked M whether there was anything else that she wanted me to look at or comment on. She was very quick to tell me there was: word order. She wanted to have feedback on this aspect of her language use as her own wording was too frequently rearranged by her American cousins. On another occasion: "Yes, we've been wondering for a long time about when you use *may* and when you use *can*, for example, . . ." Yet again, "I don't know if I really understand about imperatives," and so forth (Anonymous, personal communication, May, 1988).

However, despite the stated emphasis and pursuit of a number of specifically "language" oriented objectives, we were by no means limited to these. As M became increasingly at ease in co-directing her own educational process, we were to spontaneously devote several meetings to discussion of "problems" of significant issues for her. Unable, of course, to be more specific for reasons of privacy, these ranged across psychological, legal, political, and cultural questions, and were thus to naturally yield legitimate forums for applied language use in a variety of content (sometimes culturally-contrasting) areas.

There cannot reasonably be any direct inference of benefits of a *sine qua non* nature in attempting to qualify this particular educational experience for M. Certainly, M was tremendously successful in her ESL acquisition during her 7 months of school life, but just as certainly there were many factors, experiences, and people inextricably contributing to this overall result. However, I should like to summarize the positive benefits of a collaborative approach such as ours in terms of those aspects which seemed to enhance accomplishment of the following (previous amplified) educational goals:

1. Self-worth: the markedly greater opportunities afforded for responsible self-direction and collaboration in determining one's educational process. M may have been expressing this in her own way when she wrote in a farewell note, "I like being your friend. Besides all the fun we had it gives me a little status" (Anonymous, personal communication, June 3, 1988).

2. Critical thinking: implicit in the ongoing co-learner negotiation and evaluation essential to this approach.

3. & 4. Full literacy and second language acquisition: Accepting a definition proffered by Enright (1986) of communicative competence and full literacy as "one's capacity to construct and to communicate meaning across all of the settings one encounters and for all of the purposes one wishes to achieve," there are indeed several bonuses inherent in the collaborative process itself. Since a collaborative process involves ". . . intentionality, interest, and motivation on the part of the learner" (Winograd & Greenlee, 1986) it therefore increases the likelihood of a fertile affective environment. Its intrinsic flexibility also lends itself more readily to "meaningful" exploration of a wider range of contexts, including support of content area specific concepts and uses of language.

5. Learner autonomy: Acceleration toward this end also informs the process, with its emphasis on learner responsibility and initiative.

In looking back at my own response to our educational partnership, I too could echo M's sentiments, "I like being your friend. Besides all the fun we had it gives me a little status."

Once past the initial morass of panic, uncertainly, and discomfort--I did like it, it was "fun"! In fact, such was the unaccustomed aura that it was not long in provoking a precipitation of guilt. Surely I couldn't be doing my job, a serious business of the well-planned, well-controlled dispensation of knowledge to its variously interested or disinterested recipients. Indeed, I was doing my job, by far a more demanding and challenging one for my profession!

As never before, the teacher must be prepared, not just for execution of Lesson 4, Unit 11, but also for using a fully functioning knowledge of one's subject matter, its available resources, and supporting resources in order to apply authentic language in the construction and communication of meaning. The task of communicating meaning or comprehensible input (as earlier defined, would for me constantly demand the fullest employment of my linguistic expertise and powers of perception. This alertness and acuity had also to be harnessed in sustaining an appropriate environment. Such an environment defies specification. It is dynamically capable of promoting discovery and learning, flexibly assessing, adjusting (deleting, incorporating, deviating, circumventing), and reassessing in response to student input; it is amenable to the uncertainties of exploration, its successes and defeats; it is capable of nurturing critical thinkers in an "evolutionary process" of the "act of knowing" (Crawford-Lange, 1981).

Indeed this *job*, with its requisite of professional competence does give me *a little status*, the status of constructive autonomy versus that of passive automaton. It gives the impetus for development and improvement, previously superfluous. It underlines the dialectical interaction between teacher and learner.

The intent of this discourse has not been to provide a blueprint for a particular curricular approach or method of instruction. Rather, as entitled,

the paper points toward collaboration as a viaduct for teacher/student interaction in management of the teaching/learning processes, thereby enabling us "to teach from learners rather than at them" (Bernhardt, 1986), and learners to access positive, task-oriented strategies as opposed to "strategies aimed at avoiding failure" (Winograd and Greenlee, 1986).

My own experience has led me to appreciate the validity of Paulo Freire's observation that "experiments cannot be transplanted, they must be reinvented" (cited in Wallerstein, 1983): reinvented by each uniquely-composed unit of teacher(s) and student(s). An interactive operational matrix, in its ability to specifically account for the who, where, when, why, and what of the situation, could provide a viable mechanism for determination of the *how*. By definition, it also has the capacity to register and respond to the *evolutionary* nature of the process, progressively complementing, eliminating, reinstating from among the array of alternatives (curricular or instructional) as appropriate and functional for the individual unit. Indeed, ESL teachers might find exploitation of such a framework particularly useful in addressing the dilemma of multi-level and frequently fluctuating student populations.

The purpose of this article will be served should others also be motivated to "bridge the gap" toward the establishment of a fertile learning environment, resulting from teachers and students working together in pursuit of a common goal.

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APPENDIX

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